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Prey Animals

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"Show your belly, softpaw!" The Vrrl's roar echoed through the promenade. Mynil's translator helpfully conveyed the meaning. "Show you have learned deference, and I might decide not to teach you fear."

Mynil hustled through the crowd, but stopped when he saw his partner moseying forward at a much slower pace. Kelsor had not even bothered to draw her stunwhip.

"Shouldn't we hurry?" Mynil asked. "That Vrrl is going to attack!"

"No need," Kelsor burbled. "I've been waiting for this. I'm surprised it took so long."

Mynil's eyestalks swiveled towards a gap in the crowd. He could see the Vrrl, now. A male specimen, large. Its top set of arms were long, heavy with muscle, and spread wide in an intimidation gesture. Its smaller arms were bent in front of it, ready to defend. Its feet and all four of its hands were tipped with curved, wicked claws. Its fangs were bared, and its three eyes glared at a two armed biped.

A human. It was as Mynil feared. The Vrrl hated humans. They considered them to be prey animals, and the refusal of a prey animal to accept their dominance was an insult they could not forgive. The Vrrl Starfang Empire had gone to war over it, and their defeat at the hands of the Terran Federation had only stoked their hatred further.

The Vrrrl growled another threat at the human. The human replied, but his voice did not carry far enough for Mynil's translator to activate. Both creatures were unarmed. The only weapons allowed on Tenril Station were those used by security. *Not that he needs one*, Mynil thought. The Vrrl were apex predators. Mynil's stunwhip felt small and ineffectual in his tendrils.

"Should we not intervene, Kelsor?" He asked his partner. "We've already had two human deaths this week." In both cases, the Vrrl responsible had fled to their ships before security could reach them,. Their Clawleaders had been heavily fined for the deaths, but that was poor consolation to the families of the victims. Nor did it act as a deterrent. The Clawleaders had purred their pleasure as they paid.

"Just watch, rookie." Kelsor's voice rippled with amusement. "This is gonna be good."

The Vrrl leaped for the human, grasping with his large set of arms. His head shot forward, seeking to crush the man's head in his fangs. Instead of screaming and dying, the human swept an arm under the predator's top arm and made an oddly graceful

twisting motion with his legs and torso. The Vrrl was flung to the ground. Both combatants had moved so swiftly Mynil barely had time to flinch.

The Vrrl let out a whuff of air. The human took two steps towards it. As the creature regained his feet, the man made another oddly graceful turning motion. His leg flashed out in an arc, coming down and across the predator's face. A yowl of pain. Four sets of claws lashed out. The human parried two aside and twisted around the others, striking with his lower appendage a second time. His foot struck just below the Vrrl's knee. A much louder yowl, and the creature fell.

One leg useless, the creature scrabbled on the ground, reaching for the man. The primate skipped back. The Vrrl followed. The man's arm shot forward, pulling the attacker's arm straight and to the side. The man struck behind the joint with the bottom of his hand. There was a sickening crunch.

As the Vrrl screamed and spun, Kelsor remarked, "Humans are classified as prey animals. They have no claws or stingers or natural weapons. Their strength and speed are in the middle range for their size group." The human snapped another long arm. "We all know how deadly an armed human is, but in places where they can't carry weapons they are considered helpless." The human's foot arced down with graceful force, shattering the shoulder joint of a third arm. "The Vrrl have been taking advantage of this to seek revenge for their wounded pride."

The Vrrl spun itself, lashing out with it's remaining leg. "What the Vrrl do not know is that there is a subset of humans that views physical violence as an art form." The human deftly avoided the claws, wrapped himself around the appendage, and wrenched. "Especially unarmed combat. They practice daily, for hours on end, honing their violence the way musicians hone their skills with the Queega."

"They believe violence is art?" Mynil's voice was barely a whisper. He watched as the human destroyed another joint on the helpless killing machine. He had never seen such brutality.

"Not just the violence," Kelsor explained. "They see the preparation for violence as a path to physical fitness and spiritual growth. They love to compete among themselves, and they especially relish fighting other species. Those classed as Apex Predators are favorite opponents. The humans consider them the ultimate test of skill."

The Vrrl was howling, crying. He was incapable of fighting back. The human moved along his broken limbs, breaking each remaining joint with methodical precision. Mynil slid forward, gripping his stunwhip, but Kelsor stopped him.

"Wait," she said. "The human will tell us when it is time."

"He'll kill him," Mynil protested.

"He won't," she assured him. "If he wanted him dead, he'd have done it, already."

They watched as the human finished breaking every joint on the Vrrl's limbs. Mynil wanted to flee, to look away, but he did not. Kelsor stood impassively, and he did not want to disappoint his partner.

"Why are we not briefed on these humans," Mynil asked, "If they are so dangerous?"

Kelsor, made an undulating motion, the Oluken equivalent of a shrug. "They don't usually cause problems. Martial Artists enjoy competition, but they rarely pick fights. It is considered bad form." Mynil's eyestalk fluttered, signaling confusion. "They think it's rude," Kelsor explained. "Other Martial Artists will look down on them for it."

When the last toe joint was shattered the human sat, legs crossed, next to the Vrrl's head. His tone was matter of fact. "You see humans as soft. Weak. Prey. This is not correct." The Vrrl growled. Before it could speak, the human plucked out one of its eyes. He waited for the beast to stop screaming, then calmly ate the eye in front of him. "We are predators. Apex, as you would say. Your people have failed to learn this lesson in war, so now you must learn in other ways. You will bear a message to your people. You will be a message to your people. We are not your prey. If you continue to provoke us, you will become ours."

The human raised his gaze to meet Kelsor's eyestalks. He stood.

Kelsor stepped forward. Mynil moved to back her up, still holding the stunwhip. "Vrrl," she said, "Identify yourself, please."

The Vrrl attempted to speak. He could not do so properly. His jaw had been dislocated. Mynil's translator compensated. "Shrikth Kthat, Third Hsst of the *Redtooth*. I want this human charged with assault."

Kelsor turned to the human. "Human, identify yourself, please."

The human placed his hands together and bent his torso. Mynil's translator interpreted the motion as a bow, a sign of respect. "Greetings, officers. I am Kazuma Sato, of the Tenril Kenji Dojo."

Kelsor turned back to the Vrrl. "The only assault was committed by you, Shrikth Kthat. We observed you attempting to kill Mr. Sato. He was within his rights to defend himself."

"You saw, and did not stop-" Shrikth growled. Kelsor cut him off.

"He was within his rights to kill you, if he wanted." Kelsor spoke firmly. "This is the third murder attempt committed by your species on this station. If there is another, your people will be removed from the Herdgroup."

"What?" Shrikth hissed. "You wouldn't dare. The Vrrl Starfang Empire has trading rights by treaty. Banning us would be an act of war!"

"It would," Kelsor agreed. "You misunderstand me. We will not ban you from trading at the station. We will simply remove you from Herdgroup status. You will no longer be under the protection of our security." Mynil's translator interpreted the Vrrl's expression as confusion.

Kelsor leaned very close and stared Shrikth eyestalk to eye. "We will let the humans hunt you."

Edit: Fixed some errors